

A Critical Historical Examination of Tracking as a Method for Maintaining Racial Segregation

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Introduction

The past and present are in constant dialogue with each other. In order to understand fully contemporary structures, it can prove valuable to trace the historical roots of how such institutions were implemented and how they have evolved over time. Tracking, or the organization of students for instruction into different academic paths, is one such structure with a troubled history that continues to segregate students along curricular and racial lines in American public schools. Through written and oral accounts (Anderson 1988; Baker 2001; Burkholder 2011; Loveless 1998; Rury 2012), historians have illustrated how educational tracks have harmed students of color, altering their career aspirations and academic achievement since Spanish and British colonists created formal schools in the New World. Addressing tough questions about America's past is important, especially when attempting to understand fairness in educational access. This article examines tracking as a form of educational inequity and its historical intersectional influences.

I define tracking as a form of curricular differentiation where schools organize students for instruction by their abilities into one of several academic paths. There are different measures individual schools and school districts use to sort students. Historically, the first tests used to track students were IQ tests. The most common evaluation instruments today include results from standardized achievement examinations, such as the Stanford Achievement Test. Many sources conflate the terms tracking and ability grouping. The two are not synonymous. Tracking differs from ability grouping in both scale and permanence (Gamoran 1992). Ability groups are typically small, short-term clusters teachers create at the classroom level. For instance, teachers may assign students to groups based on their speed in mastering subject-specific standards or using any other set of classroom data. Tracking, in contrast, refers to curricular assignments of an entire school population based on measures decided upon by individual schools and school systems. Historically, tracking policies allow students minimal flexibility with course selection and exhibit rare student mobility from one track to the next (Gamoran 1987; Hallinan and Ellison 2007).

In the following, I examine the scholarly literature on the intersection of tracking and its historical use as a means to establish and maintain racial segregation in American public schools. I begin by exploring accounts of tracking in American public educational institutions as researched by historians of education. Then, I examine contemporary manifestations of tracking in American public schools beginning in the 20th century by education scholars examining sociological phenomena (Au 2013; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Gamoran 1987, 1992; Goodlad 1984; Haller 1985; Hallinan and Ellison 2007; Lucas and Berends 2007; Oakes 2005; Rosenbaum 1976). Within the discussion of contemporary tracking, I explore the use of tracking through magnet schools in order to circumvent federal legislation aimed at desegregating American public schools. Overall, the intersection of these bodies of literature argues that the

problematic roots of tracking continue to maintain historical racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools.

Theoretical Considerations

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the interest convergence principle within CRT provide appropriate frames for analyzing how tracking has served as an institutional strategy to maintain racial segregation in American public schools. Ladson-Billings (1998) illustrates how CRT can be used to explain racial inequality in public education by examining the effects of curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation attempts on African American youth and communities. By definition, CRT proposes that educational strategies “presume that African American students are deficient” (Ladson-Billings 1998, 19). As such, school labels surrounding Black youth are typically deficit oriented (i.e., at risk, remedial). Such rhetoric plays out in the academic tracks where schools place children. A major premise in CRT is that racism is a permanent fixture in our social order (Bell 1980; Ladson-Billings 1998). As such, methods for maintaining racial inequality “appear both normal and natural” to us (Ladson-Billings 1998, 11). Bell (1980) furthers the notion of the entrenchment of white supremacy by illustrating how the interest convergence principle applies to institutional racism. He defines interest convergence as “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (523). Indeed, Bell (1980) argues that concepts such as school desegregation came about as a guise, creating an “appearance” of racial justice, when, in fact, other structures, such as tracking and neighborhood and housing restrictions, remained in place to undermine judicial public school desegregation mandates.

For the purposes of this manuscript, I employ CRT and interest convergence as lenses to uncover historical and contemporary institutional racism in American public schools. Indeed, educational institutions are living “artifacts designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (Ladson-Billings 1998, 18). Central to critical theory is the necessity for what Freire (1972) called praxis and action to dismantle systems of oppression. Thus, a major goal of CRT becomes “one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings 1998, 11). As such, this article examines the history of the racist practice of tracking in hopes that these events inspire readers to extend their understandings into conversations about the role race has played in educating and disenfranchising African American youth for over a century.

History of Tracking

Curiosity about topics such as educational equity and historical influences on current dilemmas in education, such as tracking, are cornerstones in presenting scholarship in the history of education (Rury 2012). With regard to CRT, the formulation of a historical narrative serves as an “interpretive structure by which we impose order” on the socio-historical reality of students of color (Ladson-Billings 1998, 13). Historians, such as James Anderson, Zoe Burkholder, and Scott Baker, have researched the intersection of racial segregation and tracking in American schooling. While their larger works and research questions do not directly focus on these topics, the intersection of these fields of inquiry serves as key discussion points and evidence in supporting their overarching theses. In examining historical accounts of tracking in the American school system, I take a chronological journey through the works of three historians of education.

I begin with an illustration of tracking at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) after the American Civil War, followed by a discussion of academic tracks during the turn of the 20th century through the Cold War era, before finishing with an examination of the American Civil Rights period and how magnet schools were designed to skirt federal desegregation legislation and how tracking was used to shape the college and university options students of color had upon completing high school. Lastly, I examine contemporary manifestations of tracking, arguing that many schools continue to adopt institutionally racist policies for educating children.

Tracking During Reconstruction

Perhaps the earliest form of academic tracking in American public schools occurred in the South following the Civil War. Ladson-Billings (1998) points to this time period as one where African Americans “represented a particular conundrum” because, while legally free, they were not afforded individual civil rights (15). CRT cites their former status as legal property as a barrier to achieving rights to an equal education and access to integrated and/or properly funded public schools. As a result, African American children attended racially segregated institutions. Anderson (1988), in *The Education of in the South, 1860-1935*, argues that Northern White philanthropists, in conjunction with Southern lawmakers and even prominent African American figures, were the primary decision makers in the academic tracks and programs available to Southern Black citizens. Indeed, the convergence of the interests of southern and northern Whites with that of Southern Black citizens came together to shape the future of public education in the South. The two dominant educational pathways offered to Black students in primary, secondary, and higher education included a curricular model that promoted a classical, liberal arts curriculum and one that promoted an industrial education, instilling values such as steady work habits, practical knowledge, and Christian morals, better known as the Hampton-Tuskegee Model. Each of the models was backed by prominent African American leaders, for conflicting reasons. Booker T. Washington promoted the industrial model of education, claiming the only jobs available for Southern Black citizens were those requiring manual labor. Washington (1969) argued that an education focusing on arts and sciences would do nothing to ensure citizenship and even procure employment in a deeply racist society. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) disagreed with Washington’s ideas for education, claiming industrial education accepts the socially constructed inferiority of Black Americans and promotes a continuation of the racial caste system, stunting the ambitions of Black youth wishing to pursue a variety of careers. Du Bois’ conceptualization of public education, which did not serve the interests of *both* northern and southern Whites *and* freed Black Americans, faced heavy scrutiny and thusly did not gain the financial support needed to thrive.

The influence of White Northern missionary and industrial philanthropists was extremely powerful, since their donations dictated which schools would remain open. Indeed, as CRT indicates, White actions to control and even nefariously limit African American access to enriching educational opportunities created a system where many African Americans had to secretly create enriching educational spaces while rejecting subversive attempts by White lawmakers and philanthropists to undermine their mission to gain a quality education (Anderson, 1988; Ladson-Billings 1998). While missionary philanthropists sought to support institutions that taught a classical, liberal arts curriculum, industrial philanthropists donated to institutions that

implemented the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education. Each of the academic tracks promoted drastically different student outcomes. One prepared students for employment in white-collar professions and societal leadership roles, while the Hampton-Tuskegee model prepared students for subservient jobs in blue-collar professions. Anderson (1988) argues that funds from White philanthropists only sought to ensure stability in the American caste system. He contends that education for democratic citizenship and for second-class citizenship are not mutually exclusive concepts. Rather, the two are “fundamental American conceptions of society and progress” used to maintain established racial power structures (Anderson 1988, 1). Such structures were essential to keep Southern Black citizens working for lower wages, producing the commodities manufactured in Northern factories.

Anderson (1988) reveals the transformative and destructive power of the philanthropic funds, especially with regards to the academic tracks that were available to Southern Black citizens. For instance, Fort Valley High in Georgia, which originally followed a liberal arts curriculum, in a desperate effort to remain open, needed funds from outside sources. However, industrial philanthropists only donated to schools that followed the Hampton-Tuskegee model. As a result, Fort Valley High changed its mission in order to survive, limiting its students to a curriculum that promoted manual labor and steady work habits (Anderson 1988, 115-132).

During the period following the Civil War, schools that endorsed a liberal arts track were few in number, mostly due to the lack of financial resources and donors. Anderson (1988) points to the modest influence that missionary philanthropists held by virtue of the scant presence of such schools. As supporters of classic, liberal arts education, missionary philanthropists generally had less money and struggled to fund schools. Schools that promoted the liberal arts curriculum eventually changed their philosophy as funds from missionary philanthropists dried up and industrial philanthropists gained control. Both missionary and industrial philanthropists shared the assumption that African Americans held education to high regard, and that, if educated, they could alter the political landscape in the United States. This supposition caused industrialists to act, including organizing efforts to out fund and eliminate missionary philanthropic movements, limiting African Americans’ access to a liberal arts track, which could have prepared them for jobs in the business and law sectors. Indeed, the interest convergence principle affirms that as freed southern Black citizens gained the illusion of the right to a public education, White lawmakers found ways to maintain racist structures within schools that would continue to halt racial progress.

Tracking in the Early-to-Mid 20th Century

While Southern schools in the late 19th century used academic tracks to keep newly-freed Black Americans locked at the bottom of the social hierarchy, at the turn of the 20th century in the northeastern U.S., tracking was used as a reaction to an influx of European immigrant students into American urban schools (Loveless 1998). In 1909, famed education scholar Ellwood Cubberley stated that in order for public schools to maintain a democratic function, changes would have to occur in order to assimilate children of European immigrants, thus the implementation of tracks, where children were sorted by academic ability (Hallinan 2004). These tracks set a precedent of organizing children by intelligence, using IQ tests and standardized exams to categorize students into appropriate classes. By 1950, many American high schools

implemented some form of tracking for their students based on results from IQ tests (Burkholder 2011; Fass 1980; Sexton 1961).

During the Cold War, with the backdrop of national security and fights for racial equality between 1945-1970, American schools underwent many changes. Divergent tracks preparing students for careers in different fields, however, remained a staple of American public schools. As was true in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, race remained central to the discussion of which academic track students would be placed in during the middle of the 20th century. Burkholder (2011) examined educational discourse on race and how it was dominated by White “social scientists, professional educators, and teachers with the power to influence how schools mark particular ideas about race as defining characteristics of an educated citizenry” (14). While Black educators actively sought to alter how schools taught about race, their continued relegation as second-class citizens limited the reach of their voice. Burkholder (2011) illustrates how schools, especially during the mid-20th century, have been the institutions that created and conveyed the concept of race and the locations where perceptions of race evolved through means such as tracking.

Considering the intersection of racial segregation and the history of tracking, we see lasting legacies from the mid-20th century. One major legacy is the use of standardized testing to measure student aptitude and career interests, among other things. Using CRT, Ladson-Billings (1998) referred to the use of intelligence testing as a method to subordinate Black children and support existing stereotypes. Results from various standardized measurements have been used to shape future opportunities available to students. Burkholder (2011) suggests that school administrators and policymakers relied heavily on standardized testing measures to stabilize an Anglo-dominated, racially segregated society.

Perhaps some of the first standardized tests implemented in the American public school system were IQ tests designed to track students in the 1920s, providing what educators thought would be a “more efficient way of personalizing instruction” for all students (Fass 1980, 450). As the first tests used to sort students by ability in American public schools, IQ tests were originally created in France as a way to assess developmental disabilities in young children (Au 2013). IQ tests became widely adopted in schools across the country as a tool to “determine which curricula was best for students” (Burkholder 2011, 84). The inherently flawed nature of the manner in which these tests were used in the United States was clear to scholars like Margaret Mead, who fought against the use of measures used to divide students along racial lines (Burkholder 2011). Mead advocated for an educational environment that “reduce[d] any tendency to lump people together” based on racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds” (Burkholder 2011, 92). Opposing Mead’s notions, the practice of placing students based on test scores continued into the American Civil Rights period, where Baker (2001) explicitly points to the use of standardized measures as a means to alter the academic tracks and consequential career aspirations of students.

Tracking During the Civil Rights Era

Higher Education. Educational programs and majors (an extension of the tracks from PK-12 schools) remained elusive to many Black applicants in the mid-to-late 20th century. Identifying racial divisions, Baker (2001) claims the creation of standardized tests deliberately restricted

career aspirations and access to educational institutions for African Americans (329). In “Paradoxes of Desegregation,” Baker (2001) examined the relationship between standardized testing and desegregation movements following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that legally mandated racial segregation was unconstitutional. In perhaps one of the most explicit displays of the destructive nature of tracking in the history of formal American schooling, many traditionally segregated Southern colleges and universities publicly fought to deny Black applicants access to their institutions and programs. According to Baker (2001), Southern universities, including, but not limited to, the University of Florida (UF), the University of Georgia (UGA), and Louisiana State University (LSU) began regulating admissions in the 1950s in order to combat a growing African American desire to attend historically segregated institutions. Tactics used to regulate enrollment included requiring applicants to submit test scores for admissions (Baker 2001). For example, by 1952, the UGA College of Law required applicants to submit scores from three separate exams.

Before 1958, the State of Florida prohibited African Americans from being admitted to its public state universities. Governor Leroy Collins appointed a committee to research ways to maintain segregation in the state’s historically White institutions. Collins’s tactics were prompted by a lawsuit filed by Virgil Hawkins, a Black graduate of Florida A&M University (FAMU), seeking admissions to the UF College of Law. In 1949, Hawkins, along with five other Black students applied to UF. All of the applications submitted by prospective Black students were rejected and forwarded to FAMU, one of Florida’s HBCUs. For nine years, Hawkins fought for entry into the UF College of Law, which was the only public law school in the state at the time. He appealed UF’s rejection to the Florida Supreme Court under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, since there were no other options for African Americans seeking a law degree in Florida. In perhaps the “most extreme example of entrenched obstructionism in defending Jim Crow racism in law school admissions” (Kiddler 2003, 5), the court ruled against Hawkins and required a law school be built at FAMU for Black applicants only (Wallenstein 1999). In 1956, two years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Hawkins appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that UF must admit Hawkins to its law school. However, the Florida Supreme Court refused to extend an offer to Hawkins. After three more appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court, in June 1958, federal judges issued an injunction prohibiting UF from limiting its graduate and professional schools from limiting admissions to anyone based on race. Throughout the ongoing hearings, UF raised its entry requirements to its law school, and Hawkins, who possessed the academic requirements needed when he first applied, did not meet the new requirements and was never admitted to the school (Taylor 2002).

The only in-state colleges for Black students before 1958 in Florida were Bethune Cookman University and FAMU. At this time, Bethune Cookman offered no graduate degree programs, and FAMU offered limited choices in graduate programs. Students at Florida’s historically White colleges enjoyed a diverse curriculum, while Black students experienced limited curricular and academic concentrations in Florida’s HBCUs.

Battling a growing number of Black applicants for law and other professional graduate programs, many universities made compulsory the passing of the bar exam and the National Teachers Examination for interested applicants. Botching the appropriate metaphor for the adopted law school examination, the Speaker of the South Carolina General Assembly described the purpose

of this exam as one “to bar Negroes and some undesirable Whites” (Baker 2001, 331). Much to the chagrin of the federal government, which sought to quell any semblance of domestic discord, unequal access for White and Black applicants to publicly funded colleges and universities gained national attention through high-profile court cases and daily reports delivered on an emergent television news market (Baker 2001).

Countering a federal push to force state universities to admit African Americans, some states followed Alabama’s example and created funds to send African American applicants to HBCUs like Howard University in Washington, D.C., while denying them admission to the all-White University of Alabama. Other states went so far as to create specialized schools within existing universities to redirect qualified African American applicants. In Louisiana and Florida, African Americans wishing to pursue a law degree were not admitted to LSU or UF, each state’s flagship university, but were instead sent to the Southern University Law Center or FAMU (Baker 2001).

The Rise of Magnet Schools

The emergence of magnet schools coincided with the U.S. Supreme Court’s call for mandatory desegregation of schools and neighborhoods through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Magnet schools were extremely popular in states that took a “wait-and-see” approach to desegregation following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Martinelli 2015, 13). In many southern states, little desegregation occurred between 1954-1970, therefore, when the federal government issued mandatory, immediate integration measures, such states scrambled to fulfill the required guidelines for desegregation. In order to entice White students to high minority schools, some school districts offered prestigious academic magnet programs at high minority schools, such as the Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB). Through their uncanny ability to attract White students to historically Black public schools, advanced academic tracks offered at magnet schools became a “hallmark” in voluntary desegregation in the South (Martinelli 2015, 19). Proponents of magnet schools claimed that attractive curricular offerings at high minority schools addresses the issue of racial segregation while improving academic outcomes for historically disadvantaged student populations. In contrast, opponents exhibited how magnet schools stratify students along color, socio-economic, and curricular lines, since not all students have access to each track within any given school (Garner 2005).

In a historical examination of the desegregation of one of the most successful magnet schools in Florida, Garner (2005) points to the magnet school model as a way to entice White parents to enroll their children in schools with predominantly Black student populations. This school opened its doors in 1970, replacing a recently closed “All-Negro” secondary school as part of the local school board’s attempts to adhere to a federal mandate to desegregate immediately. Located in a majority African American neighborhood, the magnet school suffered from limited financial support and facility management from the local district, which diverted much of its monies to its historically White schools in the west section of town. Such inequalities prompted the school board to propose options to effectively integrate the school’s student population (Garner 2005). The mostly White neighborhoods in town rejected proposals for mandatory bussing and rezoning of school attendance zones by filing lawsuits and threatening to pull their children from the public school system. In response, the school board looked to creating a “magnet” program at the

school. Its members felt that “if students were offered an educational opportunity that was unavailable elsewhere in the district, then perhaps their parents would resist less to having them bused across town” (Garner 2005, 255). As a result, the school became home to the state’s first IB program.

The magnet school model, which continued to be embraced by many Southern states, offered a specialized curriculum. Many Southern districts placed magnet programs in schools with majority-African American populations, skirting the issue of *de facto* segregation. As Garner (2005) noted, “a school desegregated on paper is not necessarily integrated on its campus” (264). Indeed, residential segregation, historically and currently, remains an issue in many communities, but many magnet programs continue to fulfill the technical federal requirements of racial desegregation. Critics of the magnet model claim that such schools do nothing to address inequities. Instead, they act as “schools that have been made so attractive educationally (magnetized) you will want to enroll your child voluntarily in spite of the fact that [they] will have to go to school with Black [students]” (Foster 1973, 24). Indeed, many magnet programs do not act as a part *of* the school as much as they foster an atmosphere where the magnet students exist apart *from* the mainstream student population. Such programs foster within school segregation, where the magnet students, who are mostly White, attend their advanced level classes, while the “neighborhood” students, who are mostly Black, are relegated to mainstream level courses (Garner 2005).

Contemporary Tracking

After surveying a historical foundation of the uses of tracking in American public schools, this section examines contemporary uses of tracking and the problems associated with tracking in American public schools. Contemporarily, tracking is used as a means to facilitate delivering instruction to students who may have divergent educational and career goals. While the stated purpose of tracking is benevolent in nature, the continued use of tracking to legally segregate student bodies by race remains ubiquitous in educational contexts. Research shows that these nefarious uses of tracking continue to have severe consequences on students of color.

In larger comprehensive high schools, curricular differentiation is needed to help teachers organize instruction for different groups of students. Attending college is not the desire for every student in high school. Therefore, college preparatory tracks may be inappropriate for students needing a high school diploma in order to enter a trade of their choice. As such, the practice of sorting students into different tracks is not inherently unjust. The methods used to measure intelligence and sort students into different curricular tracks, however, are flawed and reproduce existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities (Au 2013). Results from standardized intelligence measures, such as IQ and Stanford-Binet intelligent tests often decide students’ academic track, allowing them and their families little say in their appropriate or desired academic programs. Au (2013) argues that the use of standardized testing fulfills the roles of “both legitimating and masking structural race and class inequalities” (16). Indeed, school leaders have used scientific measures to legitimize and duplicate the persistent inequalities of the outside world within schools.

Spring (2016) argues that, through tracking, schools play a role in economic segregation, social reproduction and maintaining social class distinctions. He refers to tracking as a method schools use to separate students along household income lines, where the “higher the family income of the students, the more likely it is that they will be in the higher ability groups or a college-preparatory curriculum” (84). He also asserts the converse argument, where “the lower the family income of the students, the more likely it is that they will be in the lower ability groups or the vocational curriculum” (84). While Spring (2016) critiques tracking’s role in segregating students within schools, Bowles and Gintis (1976) examine the role of tracking across multiple schools. Indeed, social reproduction also occurs across schools within larger districts. The type of schools available to students from different economic backgrounds informs the type of curriculum the students receive. Bowles and Gintis (1976) claim that schools with a majority of students from low income homes tend to be authoritarian in nature, demanding conformity and uniformity in their students, preparing them for subservient, often low-paying careers. Meanwhile, students from high-income neighborhoods usually have access to educationally innovative schools that promote independent thinking and problem-solving skills (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Oakes 2005).

Educational attainment has become synonymous with prestige and status in the U.S., and tracking systems in American public schools have historically decided who is afforded the opportunity to benefit from the rank associated with higher education (Clark 1961). There is a robust body of scholarship linking tracking and student academic prospects. Such studies acknowledge tracking’s ability to stratify learning opportunities for students in upper and lower tracks, pointing to the harmful nature of grouping students by ability (Gamoran 1987; Haller 1985; Lucas and Berends 2007; Oakes 2005; Rosenbaum 1976).

The most common academic track programs in modern American high schools are college preparatory, vocational, and general. As college attendance is not compulsory, the college preparatory track may not be appropriate for all students. Students hoping to learn a trade and enter the workforce immediately after high school have historically had the option to enter the vocational track in order to focus on perfecting a range of vocations. According to Sexton (1961), students and parents should have the final say concerning which academic track is the most appropriate. In practice, however, teachers and administrators typically make these decisions with “firm and directive” hands (158). Low-income parents and immigrant families are less likely to question the school’s decisions regarding the education of their children (Ogbu 1987; Sexton 1961). As a result, as more and more vocations move toward requiring a college degree for employees, students occupying vocational and general education tracks in American high schools become further marginalized through their increased difficulties in finding employment (Goodlad 1984). Indeed, there are marked differences between the academic tracks in American high schools, and the different tracks direct the career opportunities of the students within them.

Rosenbaum (1976), in a study of a racially homogeneous school with a stratified track system, suggests that lower tracks usually offer a more narrow range of course options and an even narrower variety of post-graduation options than advanced track programs. The availability of such opportunities translated into a marked dispersion of IQ scores between students in the different tracks (Rosenbaum 1976). Adding to variability in IQ scores across tracks, scholars

have also noted that many teachers in lower tracks set lower expectations for their students (Goodlad 1984; Haller 1985; Oakes 2005; Rosenbaum 1976), subscribing to the assumption that students from high poverty backgrounds do not possess lofty post secondary aspirations. As such, Rosenbaum (1975) noted a positive correlation between IQ scores and a student's academic track, while Haller (1985) found that the lower tracks are generally reserved for students from poverty. Gamoran (1987), in an attempt to "uncover the mechanisms through which stratification in schools differentiates student achievement," also explains how students within the upper tracks are generally a "more affluent clientele" (135) and are the sole beneficiaries of tracking.

Gorski (2013) furthers Rosenbaum's (1976), Haller's (1985), and Gamoran's (1987) arguments, focusing on the interaction between socioeconomic status and race, claiming that "poverty does not happen in a vacuum" (44) but is rather a symptom of racial identity. According to a study conducted by Taylor, Kochhar, Fry, Velasco, and Motel (2011), "median wealth in White households is 20 times that of Black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households" (1). Indeed, non-White households are far more likely to live below the poverty line than White households. Goodlad (1984), Lucas and Berends (2007) and Oakes (2005) furthered this claim, noting that race plays a dominant role in track placement. In their separate studies, they found, regardless of socioeconomic status, White and Asian students were more likely to be placed in upper track courses, while Black and Latino students were more likely to be placed in lower track courses. In their study investigating whether overall racial/ethnic student populations among schools mirrored that of the different tracks within the individual schools, Lucas and Berends (2007) found "the more racially diverse the school, the better White [students'] chances and the worse Black [students'] chances of college prep course-taking" (169). The college-preparatory nature of many upper tracks remains a coveted benefit, an advantage students in other tracks are not afforded (Gamoran 1987). Indeed, being a part of the upper tracks can positively alter the non-academic present and future outcomes for students.

Perhaps the most notable scholar researching tracking is Jeannie Oakes. In her book, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Oakes (2005) sought to characterize the differences in educational experiences of students in 297 classrooms in 25 middle and high schools. Her research did not set out to illustrate the distinctions between the schools; in fact, Oakes (2005) attempted to demonstrate the drastic differences in student experience *within* the schools and how these experiences subvert what she calls the "American notion of equality" (p. 4).

Oakes (2005) used the data compiled by Goodlad, former dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and his research team in the 1970s. Goodlad's team sought to answer the broad wondering—What happens in American schools? Much of the data Goodlad and his team gathered were addressed by Oakes's (2005) study. Among the findings, Oakes (2005) discovered that "low-track courses offered less demanding topics and skills, while high-track classes typically included more complex material and more thinking and problem-solving tasks" (226). The study also showed that tracking cultivated low self-esteem and led to more dropouts, while negatively affecting future aspirations of students in the low tracks.

Indeed, track systems have a propensity to shape the future aspirations of students, as the ability group to which students are assigned dictates the amount and types of courses students take (Oakes 2005). Tracking becomes an issue of equity and social justice when we consider that low-income African American and Latino students are far more likely to be enrolled in low-track classes than their White and Asian classmates (Oakes 2005). In the school systems Oakes (2005) studied, she found that when White, Asian, and Latino students had the same standardized scores, 93% of Whites, 97% of Asians, and only 56% of Latino students were enrolled in high-track classes. Furthermore, considering all students who scored in the 90th percentile on national math and reading achievement exams, 85% of White students were enrolled in high-track classes, while only 63% of students of color were enrolled in those same courses (Oakes 2005).

These statistics are sobering, especially when considering the benefits high-track classes offer. Advantages include access to more resources and classroom environments designed for collaboration and student interaction (Oakes 2005). Another enticing privilege of high-track courses is the extra grade points students have the opportunity to earn, which can strengthen their grade point averages, making them appear more appealing to colleges and universities (Oakes 2005). Certain courses also allow students the prospect of earning college credits in their high school courses. As such, Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that the “distortions, omissions, and stereotypes” of the curriculum of lower tracks are only part of the problem (p. 18). CRT contends that we must examine the what is meant by enriched curriculum, which is restricted to the advanced tracks (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Another major difference between high track and low track classes is the expertise and dedication of the classroom teacher. According to Oakes’s (2005) study, many teachers do not see low track classes as desirable. In fact, within schools, teachers may “jockey among themselves for high-track assignments,” or campus administrators may reserve assignments of certain courses as either rewards or punishments for teachers (Oakes 2005, 227). Teachers of high track classes usually “put more time and energy into their teaching” (Gamoran and Berends 1987, 424). Teachers also play a significant role in the polarization of students across tracks. Gamoran and Berends (1987) found teachers viewed high track students more positively and low track students as “inferior” (427). In many cases, this leaves low-track students with the least prepared, least invested teachers. In her 25-school study, Oakes (2005) found that many of the teachers in low track classes placed less emphasis on learning goals and spent more time on “routines, seatwork, and worksheet activities” (227) instead of engaging students with concepts and promoting collaboration and problem solving skills.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, schools are notorious for reproducing inequality and maintaining the social stratification ubiquitous in society (Apple 2012; Grant 1988; MacLeod 2009). According to Grant (1988) and following CRT, schools have “never provided equality of opportunity” mainly because they have mirrored the inherently unequal, hierarchical structures of the outside world (218). These hierarchical classifications continue to create associations between student success in school and the way they and others perceive and identify their abilities (Oakes 2005). For instance, many view students in advanced track courses as advanced people, while students in remedial courses are stigmatized with the label “struggling learner,” generating a tiered system outside the walls of the school based on the practice of tracking within the school. Over time, students begin to adopt these identifiers as their personal identities. As a

result, through the hierarchical casting of tracking, schools dictate the career aspirations of their students (Oakes 2005).

Conclusion

Public schools across the U.S. have scarce representation of students of color in their advanced academic tracks. Methods used to dictate academic tracks employ the power to direct the learning opportunities and future prospects available to students. Historically, tracking practices in U.S. public schools have been employed to maintain a racially segregated society and limit academic and career prospects of students of color. The illegal practice of racial segregation continues to occur today through legal means. In magnet programs, schools within schools are created, where students attend classes in separate areas based on the track to which they are assigned. Research shows that students' race, as opposed to academic capabilities, is a predictor of academic track, where White and Asian students are far more likely to be enrolled in advanced tracks, while Black and Latino students are far more likely to be enrolled in lower tracks (Gamoran 1987; Oakes 2005). In short, tracking practices are a form of racial injustice and limit opportunities for students of color. CRT provides an appropriate framework for deconstructing racist tracking practices in order to imagine a more equitable and socially just educational system.

There is a robust body of historical scholarship examining the application of tracking practices in U.S. public schools along with other studies seeking to investigate the effects of tracking on students' future aspirations. Other, more contemporary studies, have scrutinized the manner in which tracking methods isolate students by race within schools, essentially resegregating schools. Threaded throughout historical and contemporary accounts, CRT and the interest convergence principle explain tracking practices are necessary for maintaining racial segregation and inequality. As legal decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) provide an illusion of racial equality, other structures such as tracking remain in place to maintain the entrenchment of racial segregation and inequality.

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